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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the reflections of an early childhood special education professional on her visit to the preschools of Reggio Emilia, Italy. After describing the activities observed, the schools' philosophy, and the schools' environments, the paper discusses how the schools work with children with "special rights" (i.e., special needs). The paper concludes with observations on the role of parents and the community, and lessons learned from the trip. (Author)

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Table of Contents

Reactions to Visiting the Infant-Toddler and Preschool Centers in Reggio Emilia, Italy

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Abstract

This article discusses the reflections of an early childhood special education professional on her visit to the preschools of Reggio Emilia, Italy. After describing the activities observed, the schools' philosophy, and the schools' environments, the paper discusses how the schools work with children with "special rights" (i.e., special needs). The paper concludes with observations on the role of parents and the community, and lessons learned from the trip.

Introduction

I recently returned from visiting the preschools and infant-toddler centers in Reggio Emilia, Italy. My visit challenged my beliefs about early childhood education and early childhood special education and caused me to reflect on my experience of 29 years in the field.

Activities and Philosophy

The municipality of Reggio Emilia, Italy, has a network of 13 infant-toddler centers and 19 pre-primary schools. These centers are known worldwide for their philosophy of teaching young children through what they term the "hundred languages" of childhood—including graphic representations of the children's thoughts and ideas, and verbal, motor, musical, mathematical, ethical, imaginary, cognitive, and moral expressions, to name just a few of the other languages of childhood. Learning in the Reggio Emilia centers is connected with children's real lives. For example, each child has a mailbox, and messages and pictures are exchanged as a natural part of the school

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day. For younger children, a photo of the child identifies his or her mailbox. For older children, the photo plus the child's name is on the mailbox. Children see the postperson delivering mail to their homes and can make the connection between those observations and the way their mailboxes are used at school. In this way, the child makes a connection to real experiences in the world.

Daily tasks also provide opportunities for learning in a Reggio Emilia center. Children work in small teams to complete tasks such as setting the tables for lunch. The names of children are on the wall with moveable magnets. Each magnet has a drawing of a knife and fork, soap and water, and so forth. The list is posted each day to indicate different responsibilities for the children in the team for setting up, serving, and cleaning up after a meal. Food is a very important matter in Italy. These activities of the children reinforce the value of enjoying the meal, taking time to enjoy talking to friends, and sharing responsibility.

A basic assumption in the philosophy of the Reggio Emilia schools is that there is an important distinction between teachers *teaching* and children *learning*. Teacher-directed teaching is all about the teacher and what the teacher thinks the children need to know. Children may learn content and skills taught, but they may be of little meaning to them. When the learning experiences flow from the children's ideas, however, there is more likely to be a good match between what the children are ready to learn and activities offered in the classroom than in a teacher-dominated curriculum. This intersection between the children's interests and their activities is critical: first, because children are more likely to be motivated to learn when they are interested; and, second, because the tension in the classroom between teacher and children is likely to be lessened if children are more engaged. In this way, teachers are learning about how to support the children's learning. As they say in Reggio Emilia, the teachers and their students are moving together in the same direction. This situation is in contrast to the struggle some teachers experience in other schools in trying to get children to learn, when the intersection of the interests of the children and the goals of the teacher seem to resemble a car wreck! In Reggio Emilia, children are not assumed to be empty vessels to be filled with instruction; they are seen as ready to learn when the right, best, or most appropriate opportunities are offered.

There is a shared belief in Reggio Emilia that children have within them an innate understanding of how to relate to the world. The job of the teacher, then, is to nurture that ability so that the child can grow and learn. I was impressed by the genuine respect for children that I witnessed. For example, the teacher meets with the children in the morning to discuss the activities of the day. These discussions communicate respect for the ideas and preferences of the children. Teachers listen closely to children's discourse and strive to understand the children's interests. Believing that teaching is not merely the transmission of knowledge, but that the teacher is a facilitator of the child's learning, teachers exhibit flexibility in planning the day with the children. Teachers also attend to cues from the children about the point at which interest in a project begins to lag. The children's work is displayed artfully on the walls.

Children become researchers in the classrooms of Reggio Emilia by learning to ask questions and collect data with which to answer them. Teachers use the arts—including painting, drawing, and working with clay, natural materials such as leaves and shells, and recycled materials such as tubes and spools—as a vehicle for understanding the

child's thinking processes. Teachers observe closely the ways in which the child uses the materials. Teacher observations include not only the child's attention to the materials but also the child's level of creativity and the questions he or she poses to the teacher.

The way that the child manipulates and combines the materials gives the teacher clues to the child's cognitive structures. Ongoing projects—usually in-depth studies of the phenomena in the child's everyday world—are central to the daily life of the center. These projects may last for weeks, months, or even a whole year. Some projects I observed were on topics such as water, light, bicycles, and growing vegetables.

Each infant-toddler center and pre-primary school has an *atelier,* which translates as studio or laboratory, which is filled with natural materials and art supplies. Many of the settings also have *mini-ateliers.* The *atelierista,* who works with the teachers and children, is a specialist in the graphic arts. This individual helps to plan weekly activities related to the project at hand. These activities might include helping children learn to express themselves in a new medium, such as clay, drawing, collage, painting, or sculpture. The infant-toddler centers share an *atelierista* with several other centers.

In addition to the *atelierista,* each center has a *pedagogista* who is available for consultation, planning, assistance with, and management of individual children one day a week for each of four centers. The *pedagogista* not only develops relationships with center staff, families, and children but also engages in problem solving with staff, exploring new options and reflecting on what is going on in the center. The pedagogista is instrumental in assisting the teachers in planning for children with "special rights" (i.e., special needs), which will be discussed later in this paper. In addition to high-quality interaction between teachers and children and support from the atelierista and the pedagogista, the environment in each center is referred to as the third teacher.

Environments

Some of the environments are breathtakingly beautiful. The environment of each center supports the imagination and creativity of each child. The inside of the center is warm and calm (no primary colors jump out at you), featuring wood, glass, and muted colors. There is space to be alone, yet the environment encourages children to interact with others. Every center has a welcoming area with comfortable adult-size chairs for parents to give a last cuddle before saying goodbye for the day. The centers are very inviting and beckon you to come in and play. Each center contains many real plants and flowers, a kiln, kitchen, piazza, dining room, toileting rooms, and garden areas.

One interesting and unique feature of the centers is the light table, which is a table with lighting underneath a glass or Plexiglass cover, used for drawing and related activities. Overhead projectors are used by the children for projecting colors or pictures on the wall. At one center, I also saw computers and scanners that were intended for the children who were working with animation. In infant-toddler centers, the changing and bathing rooms are equipped with several waist-high tubs for bathing. The environment does not look institutional in color or type. It seems much more like a home environment than an institutional one.

Classrooms do not belong to individual teachers. All staff members work together and

plan together. The weekly planning time includes the cook and other staff in the center. There is no staff hierarchy, so everyone is included in planning and working with the children. There are two teachers for each age group (e.g., for 3-year-olds). However, some centers have multiage grouping with classes of about 20 children. If a child with "special rights" (i.e., special needs) is in the class (only two are allowed per class), another teacher is added to the class. This additional teacher works with all children in the class, not only with the child with special rights.

Documentation of children's learning is everywhere, usually in the form of large photos of two or three children working together on a project with text about what the children are doing, thinking, feeling, wondering, and questioning. This documentation is revisited many times in order to review where the children were at the beginning of a project, where they are going, and what they have learned. Mobiles of natural materials made by the children hang in many of the rooms. Frescoes and large murals are displayed on walls. In one center, string hanging from the ceiling, rather than room dividers, marked off areas of the room.

I saw no plastic or cheap toys. The environment has wood floors and many wooden toys. The doors are partly glass, in order to be able to see easily from inside to outside and from room to room. All the materials I saw were from the natural world or the recycling center. Wooden blocks were in each center. Often, I saw very intricate block structures (which had obviously taken children many days to complete) in the foreground, with the overhead projector casting colors or pictures onto the wall behind the blocks. A variation of this was the slide projector showing, for example, a scene of a meadow, with the block structure looking like a part of the meadow. Homemade puppets and a puppet theater made by parents are in some centers. In some centers, a sheet was hung from the ceiling for shadow play. This sheet could be rolled up when not in use.

The *atelier* and *mini-atelier* have a beautiful array of art materials, including colored pencils, markers, watercolor paints, materials for collage and sorting (usually in a box with sections, each section containing different materials such as dried red peppers and beans), pencils and pens of different kinds, and various colors and shapes of paper. These are very inviting spaces. I wanted to sit down and draw! Trough sinks are in the bathing, changing, and toileting rooms. These low spacious sinks with several spigots allow children to easily reach the tap and stand close together while washing hands, or engage in water play. The floors are wood, but there are also small carpeted areas. I saw inviting, comfortable book corners and housekeeping areas with baby dolls very much like you find in infant-toddler or preschool centers in the United States.

The outside environments are also interesting. I saw areas for water play, hills with climbers, a child-size maze of small trees planted by the parents, and picnic tables.

Children with "Special Rights"

Children with "special rights" have priority in enrolling in the Reggio Emilia schools. Children with special rights are included in all of the activities with other children. Every effort is made not to call attention to the special needs of the child; therefore, I did not see much adaptive equipment on my visit. One day, I saw a child with a motor delay walking with the help of the teacher but no walker. My understanding is that adaptive

equipment is used when needed. The teachers try to set up the environment so it is easy to navigate for the child with special rights.

The Reggio Emilia schools work with children with special rights in a very responsive way. For example, one child with autism was allowed to roam around the school for several months while the teachers observed her to find out what was interesting and motivating for her. The staff noticed the child was interested in light. They began to offer her opportunities to experiment with light, and eventually she started to interact with another child at the light table. Continuing the interest in light, the child with special rights interacted with another child while experimenting with a prism. Reggio Emilia staff believe in starting with all children "where they are." This strategy requires knowing the child well and having good communication with the child's family about the child's interests. The Reggio Emilia staff believe that finding out what motivates a child is worth more than hundreds of meaningless exercises. Observation is used extensively for children with special rights, as with all children, in order to gain insight into the child's thinking process and understanding of self. The *pedagogista* is a helpful resource to the staff in adapting activities and materials for the child with special rights.

I asked about the interventions used to address behavior problems, a common concern of teachers in the United States. The Reggio Emilia staff reported having few behavior problems, primarily because the children are so engaged in learning. If a child is having a tantrum or other behavioral issue, there is no punishment. The staff try to empathize with the child, verbalizing the feelings the child may be having, trying to help the child understand these feelings. Teachers report looking for clues for the behavior beyond the child's outward signs in order to figure out what is going on. They consider behavior problems as an indication that the child is upset in some way and needs support. Because of the European philosophical heritage based on the psychodynamic model, Reggio Emilia staff have a philosophy that is decidedly nonbehavioral, and time-out is not used in the centers. Staff discuss these issues with the child's family, if they come up. Another strategy often used in the Reggio Emilia schools is making reference to the child's positive traits. Self-knowledge and self-understanding are major goals for young children in the Reggio Emilia schools. Every interaction with an adult is intended to facilitate the development of a child's self-knowledge and self-understanding.

The Reggio Emilia philosophy, in which each child is accepted for his or her unique learning style, facilitates acceptance of all children. The continuum for acceptable behavior is quite broad. A child who is very active is not seen as a problem but as a child who needs to move around during the day, and adaptations are made for that child. Drugs are not given to children for behavior problems. Adaptations are made in the environment through thoughtful observation of the child. Children are valued because of their differences and are not medicated or expected to change. This assumption fosters a flexible and adaptive attitude that children and families find very supportive. This attitude also supports the process of assisting the children in developing self-knowledge and insight about their own learning style, interests, and strengths.

Reggio Emilia staff often discuss the use of wait, watch, and respond as a strategy to use when working with all children—especially children with special rights. Because funding for the Reggio Emilia schools is not based on labeling children, children are always treated as children first. If the child has a documented disability, such as Down syndrome, this fact is noted. The child is observed, and documentation is developed

about the child's strengths and areas of concern. A formal document is developed, called the "declaration of intent," which is a written agreement between the school and health authorities to ensure collaboration. Parents are included in this collaboration with every step of the development of the "declaration of intent." This document is flexible, providing a direction for the education of the child with special rights. In addition, a portfolio is developed for each child with special rights, as it is for all children in Reggio Emilia schools. This portfolio documents the child's progress over time in all developmental areas. Copious observation notes are collected about each child as well.

I think the services for children with special rights are carried out in a very thoughtful manner. The naturally occurring environment for all children is adaptive and inclusive. The goal for all children is to emphasize the value of differences rather than the stigma associated with disability.

Parents and Community

The parents of the children in the centers are essential participants in all planning and in many activities. They are on local and community advisory boards, and some parents volunteer in the centers. Parents help with projects, discuss projects with their children, and help children gather information for projects. On our visit, we met parents who seemed very engaged and pleased with the educational experiences for their child. An essential component of the Reggio Emilia philosophy is creating a community of caring adults who value children.

The Emilia Romagna region in which the small town of Reggio Emilia is located is in a part of Italy that has been governed by socialists since World War II. This philosophy is evident in the Reggio Emilia schools and community. Individual needs are balanced by the needs of the group. The community support for the schools is remarkable. The town supports education with a large portion of its budget—indicating the high priority in which children, families, and community are held. Also, in Italy, there are strong cultural beliefs about the importance of family. These philosophical and cultural values provide the rich context of support for the Reggio Emilia schools.

Reflections

The following statements are a summary in "telegraphic" language of what I learned from my visit to Reggio Emilia:

- Take time to listen; know what you are listening for.
- Listen to each child's melody.
- Provide space and time to be alone.
- Accept the premise that learning need not be lonely.
- Recognize that dialogue is more valuable than singular thought.
- Keep boredom away.
- Value the process of thinking.
- Ask "Why?"
- Help children ask "Why?"
- Question everything.

- Seek truth, but realize there is no one truth.
- Accept and value differences.
- Shun the stigma associated with disability.
- Have a profound respect for each child.
- Look further into the reasons for a child's behavior, rather than just the external signs.
- Recognize that it is all about relationships.
- Reflect.
- Understand the importance of enjoying food and rest.
- Observe, document, and interpret.
- Wait, watch, and respond.
- Recognize that documentation is visible listening.
- View the child as the protagonist in the environment.
- See the teacher as a facilitator and guide assisting the child in learning.
- Understand that instruction and education are different.
- Do not hurry the children or yourself.

These are questions I asked myself about my work with children and families:

- Do we value and respect all of the various ways children express their thoughts and feelings?
- Do we value equally the verbal and the nonverbal child? The arts? The rational thinker as well as the creative thinker?
- To what extent have artificial labels been developed for children who do not fit into our educational system and its narrow perspective of learning. This narrow perspective rewards highly verbal children who can sit still and do their work.
- What are ADD and ADHD if not different styles of learning?
- Do we label for our own convenience?
- Do we medicate children instead of looking at our own practice and the environment we create and make changes there?
- Do we listen to what children say with their words? Their behavior? Their body language?
- Do we reflect enough? Do we take time to reflect?
- Do we interrupt the thinking processes of children when we adhere to a rigid daily schedule? Do we actually lessen their attention span in this way?
- Do we carry out meaningless activities for short periods of time during the day that are not connected to the child's real world and experience?
- Do we really value families?
- Could we observe children more often in their daily routines?
- When we assess, do we use the information in planning educational experiences? Or do we primarily utilize the information to label the child?
- Do teachers teach or children learn?
- Do we pay enough attention to a child's motivation for learning?
- Do we pay enough attention to a child's strengths?
- How do we help children understand themselves?

My memories of my Reggio Emilia visit are filled with beautiful images and many questions. Yet, I feel very calm with the knowledge and experience I gained in Italy. Now, I am working to share my understanding of the high-quality early childhood education and early childhood special education that I witnessed there. Yes, I believe

that we can learn from Reggio Emilia. Such important basic ideas as taking time to listen to and observe children, valuing and respecting children, involving families, valuing differences rather than perpetuating stigma, and being open as a teacher to learn along with the children as they investigate real-life questions through projects are worthy of our consideration. Building strong community educational networks that are supportive and nurturing for all children and families, regardless of social class or cultural and linguistic background, are possible and desirable. But, first, children and families must become a priority.

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ECRP Home Page | Issue Intro Page | Table of Contents